

*Erev Rosh Hashanah 5785 – Share Our Stories*

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I am grateful that you are here tonight for this homecoming as we join Jewish communities around the world to usher in the new year of 5785. No matter if you're in Shanghai or Savannah, in Paris or Portland, or in Louisville, Jewish communities around the globe are linked by sacred time. For a thousand plus years, Jews and those who consider themselves Jewish adjacent, are here for this annual homecoming.

For some, it may be their first time in a synagogue ever. For others, tonight is another memory to be deposited in a great Jewish memory bank, where this *Rosh Hashanah* swirls together with new years gone by. What do we bring with us tonight? What do we bring in our hearts? Why are we here this year?

One of the Torah's names for *Rosh Ha Shanah* is *Yom Hazikaron*, the "Day of Remembrance" (not to be confused with the modern Israeli Memorial Day, which goes by the same name). Rosh Hashanah is a day of for remembering; it spurs us to reflect on the nature of memory. While history can often consist of dates and events, memory is personal, individual. History is something that happens to somebody else, memory is "my story." Memory molds, shapes and guides us.

This is a day to remember. Not in the classic sense, as to recall something, but rather to re-member, as we put a hyphen between the first and second syllables of the

word. The New Year beckons us to re-member, or to take ourselves apart a bit, to reflect and then to put ourselves back together again, to re-member ourselves, to gather ourselves for a new year.

Part of “re-membering” is connecting with our personal memories, our stories. The writer Philip Pullman reminds us that “After nourishment, shelter and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in the world.” We need to tell and hear memorable stories that touch our hearts.

On *Rosh Hashanah*, we begin to do this – not only through the name *Yom Ha Zikaron*, but through the beckoning of the *shofar*, the quiet reflection time built into prayer, and through opening up and sharing stories and memories. Don’t worry – you don’t have to get up and spontaneously share a personal memory now! Some of you may be relieved by this, and others may be disappointed!

Given that I am new to AJ, I would like to share a story with you tonight as we get to know each other a bit and prepare to take a ten-day journey together, from now through Yom Kippur. I would like you to get to know me, and I look forward to getting to know you better too.

When I was a teenager, I met a vivacious and spicy woman named Rose Hyman. I remember Rose’s zest for life; she loved to dance, play cards and have fun. Born in Canada, she emigrated to California as a young woman and spent her adult life providing care for those in need in a senior living home.

I had just lost my own Granma Jerry to a long and debilitating illness. My Granpa Fay was now a widower and he filled his days working as a security guard at Leisure World, a vibrant senior living community. Knowing Granpa Fay was recently widowed, Rose would bring warm casseroles to the small guardhouse where he was stationed. Those tasty casseroles must have been something special, because it didn't take long for Granpa Fay and Rose to begin a lovely courtship. She looked out for his health, he doted on her and before we knew it, they had eloped in Las Vegas. So much for wedding invitations: they figured that in their age of wisdom, they could dispense with all of that. And they did.

They were married for four marvelous years and shared many good times together. Emphysema eventually claimed his life, but Nana Rose lived on as a vital part of my family. She made the *shidduch* with Granpa Fay, but she was not finished matchmaking yet. She had her eye on her grandson and on me, her step-granddaughter!

Not only did Nana Rose aspire to match her grandson with me, but she was my first living link to Judaism. Growing up, I was raised Catholic. I attended Catholic parochial school for 12 years, as did my three siblings. But when Nana Rose came into my life, she brought Judaism right along with her and I began to follow a beautiful Jewish path. Through Nana's family I met Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, and through him, I encountered a Judaism that made spiritual sense to my *neshama*, my soul, and intellectual sense to my head. I learned to decode the *siddur*, the Jewish prayer book, a skill that has allowed me to make many spiritual journeys since. I met a community of caring, passionate Jews who helped me learn to be a Jew, nurturing me through years

of forming my Jewish identity and accruing Jewish memories. I became a Jew By Choice and joined the Jewish people in 1989.

She arranged the *shidduch* that led to Jeff's and my marriage, but ultimately transmitted Judaism from generation to generation. Nana Rose made *shidduchs*, between people, but she also paired my soul with the *mitzvot*, the divine lures of Jewish tradition, and opened my eyes to the beauty of Jewish living.

Now it might astonish some of you that I am standing here tonight co-leading this congregation along with Cantor Lipp and Rabbi Metzger. I have to admit, it is a somewhat unconventional story (!), but it is a part of my life story. Some could assume that all rabbis grow up Jewish, and this story may surprise some of you. But I believe we are all Jews-by-Choice. Even if you were born Jewish, you could have easily walked away from your Jewish identity, but it now requires a series of conscious life choices, one of which you are making tonight by being here. In the words of Rabbi Jeff Goldwasser, there is "no 'automatic Jew,' anymore."

We make Jewish choices and make meaning by telling our stories. Sharing stories makes a community stronger. The great 20<sup>th</sup> century rabbi, Milton Steinberg highlights that most of our stories live inside of us, when he said: "There are texts in us, in our commonplace experiences, if only we are wise enough to discern them." Our stories might matter more than the stories in the Torah because they connect us to each other on a personal level beyond history.

I wrote to the AJ community before Rosh Hashanah, asking you to share slices of your life story with me. I was touched by what you shared, and it is not too late to share if you haven't yet! Keep them coming into my email inbox after the holiday!

Stories remind us of our shared humanity. The British writer Tahir Shah tells us "Stories are a communal currency of humanity." Stories bind us to each other; they create a lasting communal fabric to hold us in our joy and in our mourning.

May the year 5785 bring us many opportunities to share our sacred stories. May we remain curious and open to the surprises that await us as we listen deeply to each other.